Philanthropist Paul Aicher
and the Study Circles Resource Center
bring people together for creative community problem solving
Paul passed away just after this booklet was published in 2002, but the commitment and passion described in these pages continue to guide our work and have touched tens of thousands of people in hundreds of communities.

Soon after Paul’s death, the Topsfield Foundation was renamed The Paul J. Aicher Foundation. Our work has continued to grow and evolve, as our country and our democracy have faced new opportunities and challenges. We deepened our learning on structural racism and economic inequality through two large-scale evaluations of our work. That led to our commitment to use a racial equity lens in all our internal and external work. In 2008, the Study Circles Resource Center (the Foundation’s primary project) changed its name to Everyday Democracy, to highlight the ultimate goal of all that we do. Today, we are working with leaders and organizations throughout the country to greatly expand communities’ access to our resources and coaching.

The occasion of the re-issue of this booklet is our announcement of the first annual Paul and Joyce Aicher Leadership in Democracy Award. After Joyce passed away last fall, we wanted to find a way to honor the generosity, caring, and commitment to voice and justice that characterized Paul and Joyce’s lives. This award will acknowledge the work of an individual and/or organization that demonstrates the values on which Everyday Democracy was founded – voice, connection, racial equity, and communities that work for all. Visit everyday-democracy.org for details.

Paul’s ultimate vision was a democracy where people have regular opportunities to come together across divides to share honestly, listen to each other, have a voice in public decisions, and find ways to work together to create equitable communities. We are honored to work with you to carry out that vision.

— Martha McCoy
President, The Paul J. Aicher Foundation
Executive Director, Everyday Democracy
April 2017
From vision to reality . . .
What democracy looks like

The democratic principles and processes described in this book have continued to reach people throughout the country. As a result, many places are functioning more like true communities. As residents, community institutions, and public officials experience the benefits of inclusion, equity, voice, and participation, they change the ways they operate. We can see a time where this commitment to “everyday democracy” results in a vibrant public life.

Picture this:

It’s a warm Saturday evening in June. Residents from all over the city are gathering for a public meeting to discuss the future of education and next steps for the community. They are also celebrating the ways community members and the schools are working together to help every child and young person succeed.

The room crackles with energy and rings with laughter. Residents come from all walks of life — all ages, racial backgrounds, income levels, education levels, religions, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, languages, immigration status, and views. Some walk or come in wheelchairs, some take the bus together, and others carpool. Even the youngest children attend and feel welcomed. Food, child care, translation services, and the arts make the space welcoming for all.

In this city, there are regular, well-attended public meetings that residents value and enjoy. In these meetings, people have the chance to get to know each other, form relationships across difference, and celebrate the community. There are comfortable ways for everyone to take part in community conversations and relate their hopes, concerns, and ideas to each other and policymakers. People know that their voices will matter and that they will have the chance to find common ground and work together to make things even better. They know that they will have the
chance to understand the racial, ethnic, and economic history of their city and how it has affected different people’s chances for jobs, housing, and schooling.

Every time a public problem arises, the community addresses it through dialogue. There are routine ways for people to meet together, hear each other, express their concerns, provide priorities to city officials, and work together to make progress. This democratic way of life makes this community a great place to live. It is known as a place where the public spaces are welcoming to all and reflect the histories, arts, and cultures of all the people who live here. And it is known as a place with strong community journalism that accurately conveys the life of the community.

Opportunities for dialogue are built into the very governance of the city – planning processes, school planning, policing, and community health. The community no longer has the kind of unproductive public hearings that used to be the norm. The ability to organize and facilitate productive public dialogue has become part of government and of nonprofit, business, faith-based, and neighborhood groups.

As a result, many systems across the community are becoming more inclusive and fair. One particularly noteworthy example is the school system. For years, the schools and other community groups have been working together to host inclusive dialogues among parents, students, teachers, administrators, and other concerned community members. In the process, education has become more equitable. Students of all races and backgrounds have access to quality education and they work across difference in their schools. On all levels, teachers are diverse and reflect the backgrounds of the students. Teachers receive regular racial equity training and share what they are learning with teachers in training. The schools have ways of considering the impact of discipline policies on students of different backgrounds, so that they can make sure to be fair to all. Parents of all backgrounds feel welcome in the schools and have regular productive meetings with teachers and each other. Students of all backgrounds are graduating from high school ready to succeed in life, whatever path they choose. The “achievement gap” is a thing of the past.

This is what democracy feels like!
DO Something
The year was 1981, and Paul J. Aicher was flying his small airplane over New England when he spied a piece of land blending hilltop and valleys, hardwood forest and meadows. “As I looked down, it reminded me of where I had spent much of my life in Pennsylvania,” Aicher recalls. Seeing a small airport nearby, Aicher landed, walked around a bit, and soon found his way to a real estate office in Pomfret, Connecticut, to inquire about the availability of the property, known as Topsfield.

Aicher was a successful businessman, founder of Technical Materials Inc. (TMI), a specialty clad metals company in Rhode Island. But for much of his life, he had spent his free time volunteering. “Don’t just stand there, do something,” was his motto. In the 1950s, not long after his graduation from Penn State, Aicher signed up for an informal discussion course, “The Cause of War,” sponsored by Northwestern University and underwritten by the Ford Foundation. The neutral facilitator leading the course encouraged everyone to share in the conversation — a format that gave Aicher a sense of empowerment. He went from perceiving himself as “just an engineer” to realizing he was a citizen who had something to say on public issues. He wound up facilitating similar courses himself.

Aicher also got involved with a refugee resettlement project begun by the Unitarian Universalist Church of Evanston, Illinois, and served as president of the North Shore Human Relations Council. Returning to Pennsylvania in the mid-1960s, he started the World Affairs Council of Berks County and led his neighbors in discussions of the “Great Decisions” guides published by the Foreign Policy Association. The 1970s brought a move to Rhode Island, where Aicher launched Technical Materials, a company he’d grow from a handful of employees to more than 150.
The demands of building a business and raising a family — he and his wife Joyce had four children by then — compelled Aicher to place his volunteer efforts on the back burner. “Whenever I was involved with community activism, I gained a lot of richness from that, and yet I enjoyed and was challenged by doing business,” he says. Still, by the early 1980s, the Aichers were considering a shift in their lives, away from the bustle of business. The Aichers bought Topsfield in 1981, and Paul began commuting the short distance to Rhode Island. A year later, Brush Wellman offered to buy TMI.

Aicher had already started moving back to community activism. Pomfret and nearby communities in northeastern Connecticut’s “Quiet Corner” were among the first U.S. towns to declare themselves “nuclear free zones.” Susan Graseck, a leader of the nuclear freeze movement in Pomfret in the early 1980s, recalls her first encounters with Aicher at that time, while he was still with TMI. “Here was this little local campaign, and I kept getting calls from this Paul Aicher, asking what he could do,” she says. Aicher didn’t look like the typical anti-nuclear activist. “Who’s the guy with the rich shoes?” someone asked Graseck after one meeting. But no job was too big or too small for Aicher. “If the paper cups needed to be picked up for a meeting, he’d pick them up,” Graseck says.

After selling TMI, Aicher plowed his time, money, and energy into activism through his newly launched nonprofit, nonpartisan Topsfield Foundation, which — from the outset — he dedicated to boosting civic engagement and improving the quality of public life in the United States. “People expect there was some person or event that was sufficiently awe-inspiring that would cause me to involve myself rather than take my money and take a long cruise around the world,” Aicher says. “There wasn’t that. There was the satisfaction of being able to do meaningful things.”
101 There’s no school for fledgling philanthropists, so Aicher simply dove in, interviewing seasoned donors, making connections, and reading all he could on the topic. “It was the same as how I became a businessman, by stumbling around,” he recalls. But from the beginning, he endeavored to be sure his money was serving not his own desires, but the needs of others. “Philanthropy is a touchy business,” he says. “People who want or need the money are stuck in the position of saying ‘That’s a wonderful idea, Paul, and we want to do that too.’ But it’s better to be sure what will be done is what the group will really need. Philanthropy is hard work: to do it well and do it right, and not to have your own ego involved.”

During the 1980s, Aicher and Graseck — whom he hired as the Topsfield Foundation’s first executive director — worked on a variety of small-scale but far-reaching peace initiatives. They published a series of regional grass-roots peace directories and made small grants of $500 to $5,000 to local peace groups across the United States. Later, to broaden nonpartisan discussion of the issues, Topsfield established a speakers bureau on international issues that included faculty from many college campuses; began ACCESS, a Washington, D.C.-based, non-advocacy information service on international affairs; and started a news service that presented diverse reporting and opinions on security issues. (Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah was an early fan of the latter project.) In a December 1987 article on notable philanthropists in Connecticut Magazine, Dan Woog wrote, “While many people give their time and money to worthy local causes, Paul Aicher of Pomfret takes the global view. His goal is nothing less than world peace.” Recalling this single-mindedness, Graseck says, “Remember the time period. We were all sitting with missiles aimed at each other, and he was trying to address that.” Yet Aicher’s mindset wasn’t entirely international; in its first decade, the Topsfield Foundation also was a leader in promoting affordable housing in Connecticut. Whether the topic was international peace building or a local community issue, Aicher insisted on a commitment to hearing all voices.
He also demanded results, and not just a touchy-feely commitment to doing good. Mary Lord, who worked with Aicher on ACCESS and other projects during this era, recalls how Aicher’s business acumen informed everything Topsfield did. Lord, now with the American Friends Service Committee, tells of the time a Topsfield publication was ready to go to the printers, “and Paul would ask the aggravating question, ‘Are we making a difference?’ That was the question he’d always come back to, because he was an entrepreneur, and ‘are we making a difference?’ was really the bottom line.” When Aicher started ACCESS, “I suspect he put a good year into market research on who was doing this and whether they were effective,” Lord says. “Those are important questions that don’t often get asked in the nonprofit world.”

“It’s not about just being demanding or critical,” says Lori Villarosa, a program officer for the C.S. Mott Foundation, who has partnered with Aicher on several projects. “It’s about having so much passion to have things be the best they can be. I love that he’s always asking the tough questions.”

Yet for all his insistence on accountability and results, Aicher’s leadership style is infused with generosity and the same sense of adventure he’s brought to his personal life. He’s taken a solo bike trip up the Eastern seaboard and built his lifetime bird-watching list to nearly 400. He once had his private pilot fly an employee to Pittsburgh so she could be present at the birth of her sister’s first child. “People love him, we all love him, even when he can be incredibly frustrating,” says Lord. “(That’s) because (of his) compassion and caring for everybody else.”
By the late 1980s, a confluence of factors was prompting Aicher to further refine his vision. The Cold War was ending, and relations were warming between the United States and the Soviet Union. Graseck left Topsfield in the spring of 1988 to launch a new international education initiative, the Choices for the 21st Century Education Program at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. The Berlin Wall came down in 1989; the Soviet Union crumbled in 1991. Personal trauma struck, as well, when the Aichers’ youngest daughter, Sarah, a promising playwright, was killed in the terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

During that time of seismic change, Aicher found himself increasingly eager to advance grass-roots dialogue as the best way to address pressing public issues. Yet he wanted to avoid shouting matches such as those he’d seen in the peace movement, where hawks and doves alternately talked past and demonized one another — or where activists within a movement simply didn’t reach beyond their core supporters at all. Aicher was eager to foster a new wave of deliberative democracy, a way through which people from all walks of lives could meet and have a voice in their communities’ futures. “What struck me was how little people on different sides of (an) issue spoke to each other,” he says. “The seeds of what became SCRC grew out of that frustration.”

SCRC stands for Study Circles Resource Center. Its inspiration came in part from the late 19th century Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in New York, which provided adult education through small-group discussion. At its peak, the U.S. Chautauqua movement included more than 15,000 “home study circles” meeting on social, economic,
The American study circle movement gradually faded, but not before it had taken root elsewhere. “Officials from the Swedish temperance movement had visited the U.S. and come away intrigued by study circles,” *Boston Globe* reporter Bella English wrote in a 2000 article in the *UU World* magazine. “Because Sweden had an undereducated rural population with few opportunities for formal schooling, the study circle format caught fire there. Twice, Aicher went to Sweden to learn about the Swedish program. What he saw impressed him: ordinary folks coming together to discuss issues and in the process becoming more engaged and productive citizens.” About the same time, Aicher became aware of the work of Leonard P. Oliver of the Kettering Foundation in Ohio, who had written a book called *Study Circles: Coming Together for Personal Growth and Social Change*. Reviewing the book, journalist Bill Moyers said, “If we are to rescue the conversation of democracy from the banalities of television, Len Oliver has shown us the first step. Citizens who want to get their voices back can start right here.”

Intrigued by these stories, and following discussions with Oliver and his Kettering colleague Jon Kinghorn, Aicher turned Topsfield’s focus toward the study circle idea. SCRC began by developing small-group discussion guides to issues of current concern: welfare reform, the death penalty, homelessness, and — in 1991, when the United States was moving toward war with Iraq — *Crisis in the Gulf*. But the guides still didn’t seem to be reaching “beyond the civic crowd” of mostly white, middle- to upper-income, college-educated people, recalls Martha McCoy, who started working with SCRC full time in 1991 and is now its executive director, “and that disturbed us. Paul was asking, ‘Is this worth it?’”

“*Is this worth it?*”
In 1992, four white Los Angeles police officers were acquitted in the beating of motorist Rodney King. Unrest erupted in Los Angeles, leaving 52 people killed and South Central L.A. physically and emotionally scarred. “The violence that happened in Los Angeles, and its underlying causes, really resonated around the country,” says McCoy. A few weeks after the turmoil, McCoy attended the National Civic League meeting in Los Angeles and spoke with local community leaders about their hopes and concerns. “They told me they felt there was no way for them to talk with people from other racial groups about what had happened, much less make progress on the underlying issues,” McCoy recalls. “That struck me very forcefully at the time, and I was sure L.A. was not alone in that.”

After the violence, Rodney King issued a plea for racial harmony: “Can’t we all just get along?” Inspired by what had transpired in Los Angeles, and by inquiries from communities nationwide interested in ways to talk about race relations, SCRC decided to create a study circle guide on that topic. Finally, this was an issue that spoke to Aicher’s vision of getting people from all parts of a community to meet face to face in an effort to find common ground. “As people, we can be cold and callous and indifferent to each other,” Aicher says. “Are there ways that we as a society can find to be more human toward each other? I sensed an incredible need for people to interact.”
The SCRC staff realized an effective discussion tool would be one that would not force white Americans into feelings of guilt and helplessness over past deeds, but one that would also convey to people of color that the discussions wouldn’t “just be talk.” The staff realized that to really create change, Americans had to address the underpinnings of racism — especially institutional racism. “It’s not just that we can’t figure out how to get along,” says McCoy. “It’s bigger than that.”

From the start, SCRC gave its discussion guides away free. To generate interest in Can’t We All Just Get Along?, the center also offered small grants of $2,000 or $3,000 to help communities develop study circle programs and recruit participants from all walks of life. When SCRC announced the grants, close to 100 communities applied. “That was a sign of the hunger for people to talk about this issue,” McCoy says.

Lima, Ohio, was one city where interest ran high. “They said, ‘We need widespread dialogue but we don’t know how to make it happen,’” McCoy recalls. As one later participant, Mark Crawford, noted on a television documentary on race relations that included Lima as a case study, “You just can’t walk up to someone on the street corner and say, ‘Hey, how do you feel about racial issues?’” SCRC offered to work with the town — again, for free — to see whether and how study circles could become a community-wide phenomenon. Fueled by leadership from City Hall, Ohio State University-Lima, and area churches — especially the mostly white Zion Lutheran and predominately black St. Paul A.M.E. — Lima’s study circle program drew hundreds, then thousands of participants, in a city of just 41,500 people. Other towns took note, and word of the study circle process spread.
Today, the Study Circles Resource Center works with about 300 communities — some doing full-scale, community-wide study circles, others adapting SCRC’s tools and knowledge to their own situations. In addition to the Los Angeles-inspired guide (now in its third edition, with the title *Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations: Democratic Dialogue and Action for Stronger Communities*), SCRC has published more than a dozen discussion guides. Topics include bridging the “achievement gap” in schools, improving police-community relations, building strong neighborhoods, bringing youth into public life, and helping communities meet the challenges of growth and development.

Meanwhile, SCRC’s staff — now numbering 16 — and associates continue to travel around the United States. Their work includes providing advice on organizing and facilitating study circles; helping communities establish study circles; teaching how to develop or customize discussion guides; explaining how to set program goals and assess progress; and — perhaps most important — helping communities connect dialogue to meaningful action and change. “People come out because of issues,” says Carolyne Miller Abdullah, a senior associate at SCRC. “(If) you talk about something that people care about, you can get them to the table.”
Yet in its discussion guides and training programs, SCRC is very careful not to advocate particular avenues of change. “You have to make sure study circles are built around the concept that there is nobody who’s right or wrong,” Aicher says. Adds McCoy, “We try to help people learn to make change an integral part of the process … to take what they’ve wrestled with in their study circles and (adopt) forms of action and change that are appropriate for their own communities.”

Typically, when a community decides to try the study circle approach, it starts by forming a broad-based coalition including organizations, agencies, informal neighborhood groups, religious institutions, and more. The idea is to engage a diverse range of people, so citizens who otherwise might not have gotten involved are encouraged to share their hopes, frustrations, and ideas. Study circle organizers use a variety of techniques to draw people into the mix, including fliers at Laundromats, billboards on city buses, coverage by local media, and personal invitations.

Once people know about the study circles, a kickoff is held. Organizers in Springfield, Illinois, held their first meeting in their city’s Old Statehouse, where Abraham Lincoln gave his famous speech before the Illinois Republican State Convention in 1858. (“A house divided against itself cannot stand,” Lincoln said. “I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.”) After the kickoff, participants break up into small groups of eight to twelve people — their study circle.
The circles meet, usually two hours each week for four to five weeks. At the first meeting, participants agree on ground rules. Everyone has an equal voice, and although people don’t have to agree with one another, they promise to listen respectfully and try to understand each other’s views. A facilitator leads each circle, but his or her role is limited to keeping the conversation on track and helping the group focus on a variety of views — not steering the discussion toward any foregone conclusions.

People gravitate to study circles for the opportunity to tell their stories and connect with others. At the initial meeting (and often at future sessions as well), each participant is asked to share personal experiences relevant to the study circle topic. Through this sharing of personal, often painful or poignant, stories, the group builds empathy, knowledge, and a better understanding of where each group member is “coming from.” Common understanding then leads the group to shared problem solving and group action.

Before a circle stops meeting, it comes up with suggestions for ways the community might address the issue at hand. The study circle process concludes with an action forum at which participants meet to discuss the ideas that came out of the circles. Of course, for most communities, that’s where the real work begins, as citizens and leaders move toward implementing suggestions made by the study circles. Yet most towns find the process helps them move forward with new alliances, greater trust, and wider citizen participation — all of which tend to present solutions that may not have been apparent before the process began.

McCoy describes the “a-ha” moment where study circle participants realize what it feels like to have a voice in community dialogue and decision making. “How many times have we heard people say, ‘This is what democracy must feel like’?” she asks. “Every time I hear that, and I must have heard it twenty different times in completely different settings… for me that sort of says we can’t recognize it because we usually haven’t had the experience, but it doesn’t feel foreign to people. We’re showing people about a need they don’t always know they have.”
Aicher tells the story of a woman with little formal education who took part in a study circle and was asked afterward whether she might consider training as a facilitator. “She said, ‘You know that’s real flattering, but not now. I just got my voice.’ What she meant was she was able to sit there with lawyers and political people, and it wasn’t whether she knew the fancy words. She could think, too; she could reason, too; she knew what the issues were, too, and it gave her this sense of confidence. That’s the kind of things that when they happen — and they happen more now — you’ll see people will have a sense of their own worth.”

“Paul’s vision is that everyone will see themselves as having a place at the table,” says McCoy. “He has a real heart for involving people.”

Wendy Nugent, an author in Fresno, California, took part in a study circle on “smart growth” with people working in such diverse fields as law enforcement, housing construction, farmland use, and Internet technology. “Although we did not transform Fresno in five weeks, I left feeling optimistic,” she wrote in an essay in the Fresno Bee. “First, it was reassuring to know that others outside my immediate social and professional spheres hold views similar to mine. Second, I discovered ways in which both the public and private sectors are redirecting growth. Finally, I was encouraged that progress is being made toward improving our city, though it’s often slow and subtle.

“Throughout the five weeks, while we vented our thoughts, I sensed that what brought these study circle participants together was not frustration or anger but an abiding affection for our hometown,” Nugent continued. “While studying growth, each of us grew in knowledge and empowerment. With the next step, urging our city, county, state, and business leaders to coordinate their actions, we can come full circle.”
Paul Aicher’s promotion of creative community-wide dialogue hasn’t gone unrecognized. In 1997, he was awarded the Civic Change Award by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. SCRC’s work has been recognized and assisted by much larger philanthropic organizations including the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and George Soros’ Open Society Institute. Dozens of newspapers have reported on study circle initiatives in their communities. And SCRC has catalogued a litany of positive changes that have come out of the hundreds of study circle programs held nationwide. A few examples:

Success
STORIES

After former football star O.J. Simpson was found not guilty in 1995 of the murders of his former wife and her friend, Los Angeles city officials contacted SCRC to train facilitators for a citywide “Days of Dialogue” program. It was an effort to be sure there wouldn’t be a repeat of the violence that followed the Rodney King verdict. SCRC staffers recall being unsure whether one-day study circles would work for conflict resolution in such a high-tension situation. But everything went smoothly, with thousands of L.A. residents mobilized to meet in hundreds of study circles across the city — some captured by network news television camera crews. “From early morning to late at night, I went from study circle to study circle,” says Martha McCoy. Senator Bill Bradley was there, too, and both of them wound up at a study circle at a drug rehabilitation center. “It was facilitated by a man from the Nation of Islam, and he helped people respect each other’s views even if they didn’t agree,” McCoy recalls. Later, she heard Bradley gathered his staff around to express his amazement at what had happened.
In Decatur, Georgia, more than 450 people (out of a city of about 18,150) have taken part in several waves of study circles, which they call “Decatur Round Tables.” The circles led to the establishment of the Decatur Neighborhood Alliance, which links the city’s varied neighborhood groups; the creation of a city staff position dedicated to supporting active citizen participation; and a course called “Decatur 101,” aimed at giving newcomers and longtime residents alike a working knowledge of city operations. An action team from the first study circles also helped craft a citywide strategic plan which — rather than simply addressing transportation, land use, and architectural issues — included quality-of-life concerns that first surfaced in the Round Tables.

“…he helped people respect each other’s views…”

even if they didn’t agree.”
A statewide study circle program in Maine involved more than 5,000 youth in discussions that covered substance abuse, school issues, respect and diversity, and more. A study circle done as a senior class project at Freeport High School identified the lack of resources for teens in their town, and a teen center/coffeeshouse was the result. Another group produced placemats publicizing the dangers of underage drinking. Eighty-three percent of the students responding to a survey said their school or community should continue to use study circles. “Adults get nervous about giving kids power,” says Nancy Ansheles, who helped lead the program. “But if you let the process happen, you’ll be amazed at how the kids use it to have important discussions and come up with actions that will help the community.”

…and come up with actions that will help the community.”
Cincinnati, Ohio, made national news in April 2001 when unrest broke out in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, among the city’s poorest, over the police shooting death of Timothy Thomas, an unarmed African American man. Within a year after the uprising, 300 people including 48 police officers had taken part in study circles begun by the Cincinnati Human Rights Commission. “It seems study circles are being accepted as part of the process of building bridges among races in Cincinnati,” says Carolyne Miller Abdullah, who helped implement the program. Study circles don’t necessarily solve the problem of racism, but they can lay a foundation for more inclusive, cooperative, community problem solving. “You can’t preach it as the panacea for everything,” Abdullah says. “But it is one tool in combating racism and other issues where race is a factor.”
The population in Kuna, Idaho, doubled from 2,000 to 4,000 over a decade. Once a small agricultural town, Kuna has become a bedroom community for Boise, itself one of the nation’s fastest-growing cities. As Kuna’s pace of life quickened, senior citizens in particular were concerned with the changes. Many residents took their anger at growth out on the schools, which repeatedly failed to pass bond issues. The local school superintendent pulled together a coalition of ministers, law enforcement officials, city leaders, senior citizens, and students to improve communication among age groups and better integrate school and community. Results of the Kuna study circles included the defeat of a school board recall effort; a “senior prom” that brought together older Kuna residents and teens for a formal dance; and the resounding passage of a school bond to help Kuna cope with its rising enrollments. Kuna’s Alliance for a Cohesive Community Team, or Kuna ACT, has since held forums on issues including disaster planning, growth, and education. Study circles have become an ongoing part of Kuna’s decision-making process.
Many other cities and even entire states have benefited from the study circle approach. In Oklahoma, nearly 1,000 citizens in 13 communities took part in study circles to address problems in the state’s criminal justice system — a process the state legislature took to heart by passing a sweeping reform bill by a 140-2 vote. The school system in Harford County, Maryland, used study circles to address the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students — an effort that paid off in the receipt of a $1.1 million 21st Century Community Learning Center grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The Harford County school board also committed $250,000 to fund an achievement-gap pilot program in three schools in response to a study circle recommendation.

Sometimes, the changes brought by study circles are hard to see, but that doesn’t mean change isn’t happening. “‘What have we avoided?’ is probably a better question than ‘what have we achieved?’” says Sandy Robinson II, community relations director and study circle organizer in Springfield, Illinois. On the concrete side, Springfield has taken steps to improve hiring practices for its police and fire departments to include more people of color. But another, more subtle, action took place in the summer of 2001 when white supremacist Matt Hale scheduled a lecture in Springfield. Rather than confronting Hale, city leaders countered his talk with a “Celebration of Diversity,” which wound up drawing more than 200 people. (Only about 15 people attended Hale’s speech.) At the very least, Robinson says, Springfield residents have been sensitized to the issue of race — and these days, when people enter the town, they’re greeted at the city limits with signs that read “Hate — Not in Our Homes, Not in Our Neighborhoods, Not in Our City.”
By the end of its first decade, SCRC had proven its mettle in developing tools for communities to address ongoing concerns. But could it react swiftly to a cataclysmic event?

Deputy Director Patrick Scully was on his way home from a vacation in Scotland on September 11, 2001, when their flight was diverted to Nova Scotia. As Scully learned about the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington via Canadian broadcasts, he realized SCRC could help people try to make sense of the tragedy. Indeed, the events of September 11 seemed to demand a response since Paul Aicher’s original vision was promoting dialogue on the biggest issues of our day, and SCRC staff had long wondered whether they could quickly respond to people’s need for connection in a time of crisis. “The next morning, I got on a pay phone and called Martha and said, ‘So, this is what we talked about. Are we going to do this guide?’” Scully says. Urged on by Aicher, the staff got to work immediately, calling on its allies in the U.S. Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service and the Watson Institute’s Choices for the 21st Century Education Program to glean material for the guide. On September 21, just 10 days after the attacks, SCRC posted a Web-only version of Facing the Future: How Should We Respond to the Attack on Our Nation?
“It was such an unusual time for everyone,” says Amy L. Malick, SCRC’s communications director. “We were all in limbo and shock, and it was really nice to have something specific to do to address this issue.” The situation actually played to SCRC’s background and strengths, Scully notes, because of the immediate concern over tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as the debate over what the U.S. military and diplomatic response would be. SCRC quickly started getting feedback from people who had downloaded the guide for use as a discussion tool, as well as from individuals who read it solely as a means to get their heads around the issue of living in terrorism’s aftermath. In an editorial praising SCRC’s efforts, the Christian Science Monitor wrote: “At this time, when people wonder what they can do to help, the usefulness of getting together to discuss subjects like terrorism should not be underestimated… Linking citizens, often from different backgrounds who may not otherwise have come together, holds great potential.”

Susan McCormack of Essex Junction, Vermont, helped initiate a dialogue in her town with the guide. “In the weeks following September 11, we were asked to support our country by going shopping. This suggestion seemed woefully lacking in imagination, and I began to wonder about our greater responsibilities as citizens of a democracy,” she recalls. “Our country faces tough questions that may well strain our unity: What is an appropriate response to these events? How do we balance civil liberties with safety? How do we deal with the realities of living in an ethnically and religiously diverse nation?” McCormack says the discussions in Essex Junction proved “an oasis in a desert of uncertainty.”
As the study circle movement grows, the SCRC staff continues to grapple with how to make the process more effective and more accessible. Hundreds of American communities have study circles, but Aicher knows there could be more. “Given the size of the country and the number of the people... it’s not nearly enough relative to the size of the country,” he says. Aicher also dreams of extending SCRC’s reach around the world, so people could connect in dialogue — perhaps by the Internet — on an international level.

As SCRC evolves, it has encouraged communities to adapt study circles to their own needs, as long as organizers remain true to the vision of broad, inclusive dialogue. “We don’t want people when they see study circles to see capital S, capital C with a little trademark name next to it. We want people to say ‘We can use this and it’s ours,’” notes McCoy. “This isn’t about trying to make a big name for us. It’s about trying to establish a practice in this country.”
When he launched SCRC, Aicher hoped communities would eventually find a way to use study circles as a continuing way of doing public business. It seems to be happening in many places. Jon Abercrombie, a study circle organizer in Decatur, Georgia, tells of a contentious period in 2001, when the local school board was faced with a decision over what to do with the town’s schools. There was widespread unhappiness over the possible options, which included potentially closing one of the town’s traditional, neighborhood-centered schools or redistricting children in the already-desegregated schools to achieve a broader racial mix. When the issue arose, there were what Abercrombie describes as the usual “public meeting disasters,” where a large group gathered to hear a few people yell at each other. Nothing was solved. “As people prepared to leave, many were saying, ‘Well, why don’t we at least have Round Tables?’” Abercrombie recalls. “So there is a sense that people engaging in issues and having public input and dialogue is becoming integrated into the fabric of the community.”
“(Paul’s) idea of success is not making people become like him...”

The school board did, in fact, authorize a round of study circles on the issue during the 2001-2002 school year before voting on the matter in March 2002. Not everyone was happy with the board’s ultimate decision in favor of the traditional schools, but citizens did gain the board’s support of an effort to address the achievement gap between Decatur’s poorer-performing students and those who excel. “For sure, the community has never had so much information about the school system and has never had the opportunity to be so heard,” Abercrombie wrote in a memo following the vote.

Being heard is what it’s all about, Aicher says, noting, “The main thing for me in building a dialogue program is for people to be able to think about something together, to be able to hear what the other person is saying. We’re promoting dialogue on critical social and political issues. This isn’t easy stuff, but it’s stuff that society has to grapple with, the things that make a society capable of functioning.”

“A lot of philanthropists have a picture in their mind of who they want to help and what they want that person to become, and in many cases, they want the people to become more like themselves,” says SCRC senior associate Matt Leighninger. “Paul wants people to be successful, but he recognizes there are differences between people. His idea of success is not making people become like him but helping them become what they want to become.”
Since Paul’s passing in 2002, the work he began and his legacy have deepened. Everyday Democracy embraces and embodies Paul’s values and principles, including his desire that the organization would continue to learn, grown, and innovate after his passing. He asked that we keep our minds and hearts open in the service of creating a democracy where everyone has opportunities for voice, connection, participation, and working together to make a difference.

As we have carried Paul’s vision and principles well into the 2000s, there have been important developments in our country and in our work.

**First**… The racial divisions that were apparent in our country when we began to work on issues of race in the 1990s became even more apparent to us as the 2000s took shape. As we continued to partner and learn with communities in every region of the U.S., we saw the impact of structural racism on people of all racial/ethnic backgrounds and walks of life. We came to realize that working for racial equity is essential to creating opportunities for people to have a voice, share power, and work with each other to create solutions that work for everyone. As a result, The Paul J. Aicher Foundation and Everyday Democracy formally committed to putting racial equity at the heart of our internal and external work.

**Second**… During the first decade of the 2000s, we came to see the critical importance of connecting dialogue to action and community change. Large-scale projects that engaged tens of thousands of people across many states and tribal communities included large-scale evaluations of process and outcomes. Through those, we learned a lot about what it takes not only for people to come together across divides to understand each other and the issues they face, but also to use their new understandings and relationships to plan and carry out actions that can benefit the whole community. This learning has enabled us to share lessons about the kinds of organizing, dialogue, and action that can lead to individual, institutional, and community transformation.

**And finally**… In the past two years, we have begun to restructure our organization to make our lessons and tools more accessible to larger numbers of grass-roots leaders, public officials, and community leaders from every sector. We want people everywhere to know that there are proven ways to cross divides,
work together, and create communities and a country that work for everyone. Toward that end, we are:

- Building a network of “anchor partners” – organizations around the U.S. who are ready to train and coach local community leaders in bringing together people for dialogue-to-change with a racial equity lens.
- Expanding our diverse network of coaches and trainers, so that in-person assistance can be available to communities in every region of the country.
- Advancing intergenerational equity and supporting the next generation of participatory democracy leaders.
- Convening people from all backgrounds, sectors, and regions, to learn from and inspire each other and work together to create a participatory, equitable democracy that works for everyone.
- Partnering at the national level to magnify and carry the practices and principles of democracy to “everyday issues” such as education, policing, health, and economic development.
- Assessing and learning, so that we can keep innovating, sharing lessons, and building on what works.
- Using the power of the arts, social media, and creative expression to tell the stories of people and communities that are bringing democracy to life every day, to inspire others to take part.

Taking Paul’s lead, Everyday Democracy has grown beyond the organization that he knew, to help address the current-day needs of our country.

Carolyne Miller Abdullah, now Director of Strengthening Democratic Capacity, reflected that the seeds of Everyday Democracy were well in place during Paul’s lifetime, and have been coming to fruition ever since:

“Paul built in inclusivity, making sure everyone was at the table, but the focus on history and structural racism was not fully realized and incorporated until after Paul’s death. And you need both.”

We will continue to grow and learn as we work with an ever larger network of people who are dedicated to making sure that democracy is something that everyone of all backgrounds can experience… every single day.

For more information visit www.everyday-democracy.org.
Author Julie Fanselow spent a week at the Topsfield Foundation/Study Circles Resource Center in spring 2002, interviewing Paul Aicher, Topsfield/SCRC staff, and friends. Paul Aicher passed away on August 19, 2002.